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1920

AN
OPEN LETTER
from
BLISS CARMAN

To
Johnny Nash
with best wishes for
Christmas and the
New Year
Bl

New Canaan, Conn.
December 1920



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“AN OPEN LETTER”

from

BLISS CARMAN



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BY WAY OF PREFACE.

Saranac Lake,

18, December, 1919.

My dear M. P. K.

It is somewhere about thirty below zero this morning, but what of that? Things begin to look better. The trail begins to lead up out of the valley toward a peak somewhere ahead, not quite clear yet — but there. We are not quite out of the woods, but they begin to thin; the drifts are not so deep; the smother is not so dense; and the going is better.

As I look back I wonder how I ever set out. If it had not been for you and my sister and Eric, I never should have got off at all. It all seemed too difficult — and unimportant. Even at the last minute I think I might have stampeded from the train, but for you and Anna Kenny and Emily. And now, behold, the ex-

pedition you all outfitted with every cheer and comfort prospers beyond imagining. Only I fear that all you have undertaken and put through for me is far too much for your strength, and no improvement of mine could compensate for such a mishap.

Then could anything be more encouraging than all the prompt and kind reinforcement from Twilight — from Mrs. Rhineland and A. F. Huston, Linda, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dazey, Raymond Gorges, J. J. Burkle, Stanley Hooper, and all those good people? It is certainly a rare good fortune to have had such a summer home all these years among the beautiful Catskills, so peaceful, so humane, so full of true neighborliness and gentle enduring friendship.

When I think of it all — what an array of loving friends! Dear Mrs. Dithmar with that unquenchable passion for kindness, blessed Mr. and Mrs. Hathaway keeping lovable their immortal name of sweet memory, Jewett and F. P. Adams and Jay Kaufman with their wondrous scheme for a fellow temporarily down, and Frank Crane with his great following — a whole marvellous army of benefi-

cience marshalled in one mortal's behalf. How unmerited, but how heartening, how inspiring!

There are so many I have the pleasure of thinking of, so many who have proved again the value of old acquaintance with astounding liberality of kindness and remembrance, — C. B. DeCamp, Edward Epstean, Gilman Hall, Harold Hall, Rupert Hughes, Charles Rosebault, F. F. Sherman, Harry Thompson, and still others, — really a wonderful list. What sheer whole-hearted kindness! What men to count as friends! And how gratifying to be remembered in Canada by McArthur and R. H. Hathaway and Stringer and Sullivan and other old comrades or fellow-craftsmen! But perhaps the most astonishing surprise in all this astonishing and really great experience has been the generous sympathy and aid from men and women I didn't know, and whom I surely wish to know one day. Here, to name only two, are Mr. A. E. Rothstein of New York and Mr. W. C. Nichol of Vancouver, both strangers and yet — what friends. How is it that there are men so royal and so unpretentious? Truly the world is no such place of selfish indifference as the dolorous would have

us believe; rather it seems a place where almighty goodness walks about and where there is more than one City of Brotherly Love.

Happy thoughts about all this have been running through my brain, and I have begun, not exactly an Apologia, but a sort of memorandum in rhyme on One Man's Case, as it might be called. I only wish it could carry to all those who must journey into the austerity of the North Woods seeking health some of the mighty heartening I have received.

What the conclusion of the rhyme must be does not yet appear. But all in good time.

Gratefully ever

B. C.

*To Mary Perry King,
Sunshine House,
New Canaan, Conn.*

AN OPEN LETTER

I.

A cold, a cough, and suddenly one day a gush of red.

Then the doctors tapped and listened, with very little said.

There are some things never mentioned, as we tacitly agree;

So they called it "an involvement," and I knew they meant T. B.

"But the clear-aired North will cure you. Pack up your kit, and go.

The cold will be your doctor, and your nurse will be the snow.

There is virtue in the open; there is healing out of doors;

The great Physician makes his rounds along the forest floors."

So they shipped me in a sleeper, with a ticket for
the North,—

From the city of my hopes and dreams, and all I
loved on earth.

I did not want a golden throne in any lonely star,
I only wanted to be left where loving people are.

I wanted just the smiles and hands that waved me
out of sight,
As we slipped beyond the station, to the tunnel and
the night.

II.

At dawn I saw the dying moon get up as we went
by,
And the yellow autumn larches standing cold against
the sky.

And a shanty in a clearing, all desolate and lone,
As if the chill of morning had struck it to the bone.

Then a line of split rail fences, a lift of rugged
hills;
And so into the great North woods I took my puny
ills.

III.

On a porch that faced the morning, in a blanket
on a chair,
I came into my fortune as they left me lying there,—

When Adam lay in Eden and looked upon the sky,
He was master of a leisure no more absolute than I.

Here was the earth,—all bleak and bare, with winter
coming on,
A grim untempting battle-field for a soul's Marathon.

This was the selfsame earth which gave the shining
April flowers,
The thrush's flute at twilight, and the tranquil summer hours;

Now dour and taciturn and hard, yet standing by to aid
The dauntless spirit that must prove of what stuff
it is made.

Stern, leading on to venture with the issue still in
doubt,
She tests our common manhood and strains the
weakness out.

She lights her far horizons with promise of the
truth,
And hangs her star of glory out to guide the steps
of youth.

She dares us with the hazard, and stings us with
rebuff,
Till we learn her ways and wisdom—and the knowl-
edge is enough.

One lesson here was plain; that I must learn the
final worth
Of good and ill, of weal and woe, as they are named
on earth.

IV.

The mountains lay around me, like giants on the
trail,
Whose strength was at my service, whose patience
would not fail.

The Sun was my attendant to light my morning fire;
The Night brought in my candles; what more could
one require?

And one great shining planet would come before
the dawn,
Over the dark blue Eastern hills, to tell me night
was gone.

I watched the silent sunrise come up, and melt and
change
Through mauve and saffron glory as it flooded
range on range,

And rimmed the purple valleys, and tipped the
peaks with fire,
Till this world seemed no more desolate, but a
Land of Heart's Desire!

New life and warmth and beauty were born there
in my sight,
And all the dimming corners of my heart were
filled with light.

V.

I saw across a valley the autumn rains come down,
And sweep in solemn grandeur across the forest
crown;

And I thought upon the valley where each man
walks alone,
And all the trails run out and stop at the edge of
the unknown.

But I did not dread solitude, nor find those vast
forlorn
With their enfolding silences, for I was Northern
born.

The great unbroken wilderness was all a joy to see,
And the firs and pointed spruces were like old
friends to me.

And when I heard the whisper of the snow begin
to sing,
My heart went wild for gladness, as if it had been
spring.

Out of the gray came whirling the legions of the
air,
That dance upon the storm-wind and make the
world more fair.

All night they wrought their witch-work until the
morning glow,
When every bough was bending with blossoms of
the snow.

Then slowly, very slowly I crept out to the wild,
With the rapture and the wonder and the footsteps
of a child.

VI.

There was a wild young river,—where Robert Louis
heard
The rapids brawling in the night, and with the
stars conferred.

And black beneath its banks of snow it ran and
murmured still,
And beside it ran the highway in the shelter of the
hill.

There day by day and yard by yard I learned to
walk again,
With the North wind for my trainer. His ways
were rough and plain,

But he stung me into courage, and put his heart in
me;
While the silent spruces watched us and the river
ran to see.

There in that snowy woodland under the mountain
side,
The surge and lift of life came back like a return-
ing tide.

VII.

Once when the thickening storm came down and
shut the hills away,
I saw a vision in the wood,—a host that showed
the way.

They spoke no word; they were not real; but they
were real to me;
And as I looked I saw—my friends, a smiling com-
pany,—

All those who left me years ago to take the un-
known trail,
And those I left but yesterday; and they all gave
me hail,

With lighted eye and lifted hand, the wonted sign
of cheer,—
“The trail is good, good all the way, and there is
nought to fear!”

VIII.

There they all stood as at review to watch me as
I came.
In front of all inspired Sir George, his eyes still
like blue flame,

As when, a great Head Master he set us in the way,
That from the straight beginning we might not go
astray.

Before that strong expectant gaze with head thrown
up to see,
I would have done my stunted mile, though it had
finished me!

And there my princely father stood, with his bright
courtly smile
That knew the folly of the world yet loved it all the
while.

There was T. R. our hero who crossed the Last
Divide,
And left the world all leaderless when its great
captain died.

And glorious Royce, with his great brow; and
Richard debonair,
With the old aplomb and tolerance of his majestic
air;

Peter the Sage of Ekfrid; Pirie, laird of the Glen;
Alan, a monarch of the air; and Eric, a prince of
men;

Great Mathew, with his four score years and royal
heart of youth;
And Levi, old-school gentleman and lover of the
truth;

Good Father John, hale, merry-souled, and straight
as any reed,
Whose tender voice makes Scripture seem the word
of God indeed.

And that tall soldier of St. George whose heart's
glow through the tan
Proclaims the captain of our faith a brother and a
man;

Brave Dr. Frank, and F. P. A., those humanest of
seers,
Whose smiling wisdom helps us bear the fardel of
the years.

Familiar, with the selfless smile St. Francis might
have worn,
Came Rutger, strong with lifting his brothers over-
borne;

And there my fellow craftsmen, the Authors, in a
band
Make haste to play their generous part, as those
who understand;

Close to their ranks a patron and patriot of Yale,
True friend of letters and the land that is too proud
to fail;

Perry, my lad from oversea, with proffer of his
best,—
Grown from a kiddie on my knee to powers none
had guessed;

Albertus, noble friend revered,—New England, kind
and wise;
Don Carlos, with the feeling heart under his rugged
guise;

Beloved Irving and dear B., who make, for trav-
ellers' need,
The City of the Angels angelical indeed;

And hospitable Shepard, who loves the murmured
rhyme,—
The whisper from the soul of things mysterious
and sublime.

Hark, Rudolph Ganz! I cannot tell which rings
with finer joy,
The spell from your inspired hands or your radiance
of a boy.

Joe, Louis, Willis, E. A. D. and Harry and B. J.;
Dillon and George, my brothers in love,—my pals
through Judgment Day;

Morton and Mitchell good to see, and my kinsmen
Will and Ben,
Who keep the ancient covenant that binds the hearts
of men;

Andrew, my chum with whom I ran the rapids
many a day,
And bent above the paddle as the long miles slipped
away.

And from the little country town where once I went
unknown,
Were those who set me by their hearth and made
me as their own;

The fine old man who stayed my heart with home-
made talk and wine;
And those with whom I sat at meat or walked
through rain and shine;

And Alfred, matchless playfellow, who helped me
pitch my tent
Among wild roses and sweet-grass where we found
heart's content.

Bertram and Ralph the builders, whose glorious
work shall stand
Among the holy minsters in faithful ages planned;

And Tom who keeps the glamor of our remembered
days
In warm unfading colors and a comrade's loyal ways.
ways.

Billy, the music master,—his genius free at last;
Great Reedy, no more troubled now,—his final
proof-sheets passed.

And who are these with modest mien, yet aureoled
with light,
Whose paths are like the gleaming trail of meteors
through the night?

O'er pampering and ignorance lies their unresting
way,
Bearing reprieve—the doctors come with cure for
all dismay.

IX.

And women—Glory be to God, who looked upon his
earth
When it was all but finished, and marked one lack
of worth;

And gave it for full measure brimmed over, and
above
All dream or understanding, the grace of woman's
love!

God's happy thought for Eden, the sheer unmeas-
ured good,
Incarnate faith and fondness, in beauty there they
stood.

April, Britannia, Sybil, Janet and Eleanor,
Daphne, Cordelia, Ona, Blythe, Chloe of loving lore,

And that patrician mother with her sweet-voiced
tenderness,
Whose hands have earned the royal right to succor
and to bless,

Agnes and Mish and Yonnie, dear ministrants of
grace,
Gertrude and Norma,—they all shone, illuminating
that place.

And my old strong-heart Loyalists with pride of
race and name,
Who feared the Lord and served the Queen—and
bred me to the same.

X.

High overhead within the storm there grew a won-
drous scroll,
Inscribed in characters of light revealed as clouds
unroll.

And Oh the names, bright lists of those whom I had
never known!
I want the hands that fit those names to hold within
my own;

And see the light of brotherhood from all those
faces shine,
Attesting their high lineage from Mercy, the divine.

XI.

There came a morning when the flakes were falling
thick and white,
And every fence and roadway was buried out of
sight.

And I heard the ranges calling through the smother
and the blow,
Till a restlessness possessed me and I knew that I
must go.

The snowshoes of my boyhood I harnessed on with
joy,
And with them the excitement and illusions of a
boy.

Friendship and Hope and Joyousness went with me
as I sped
To the spring of netted rawhide strung taut beneath
my tread.

With the creaking of the snowshoe came back the
limber stride,
As I swung across the meadow and along the mountain side.

And a shadow from the balsams stole out to walk
with me,—
A courageous smiling presence no other eyes could
see,

Close to my side as ever, a heartening snowy wraith,
My merry little sister, all love and pride and faith.

No stress could ever daunt her, no strain could ever
quell
That fond and fearless spirit. She loved and all
was well!

Through the wilderness all silent and powdery with
snow,
We kept the pace together as we kept it long ago;

Till beyond the bounds of exile, with new life to
explore,
Aglow upon a conquered height I stood—a man
once more.

XII.

May He whose habitation is in the lasting hills,
The frost and cold, the summer fields, the woods
and singing rills,

Look kindly on the little town of my captivity,
And bless the lonely wilderness that was so good
to me;

And have forever in His care, come snow or sun or
rain,
Those golden hearts who gave me love and strength
to walk again!

And may the peace of clear new moons, the solace
of the sun,
Be with the ailing of the earth and heal them every
one!

The Adirondacks,
1919-20.

